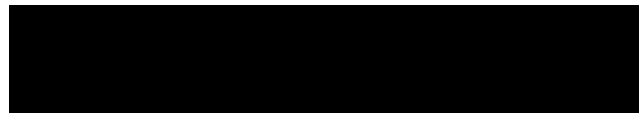


VAN LIFE: A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF CONTEMPORARY NOMADISM

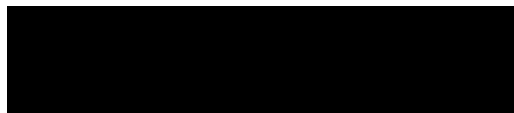
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Abstract

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Title: Van Life: A Creative Exploration of Contemporary Nomadism

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This creative thesis, “Van Life: A Creative Exploration of Contemporary Nomadism” is a both written and experiential examination of the so-called “van life” phenomena in America. The project consists of two parts, a buildout of a van into a fully livable space, and an experiential component, where the lived experience of van life is analyzed and reflected on, including design goals and personal achievements. An exploration of the history of van life by generation since World War II is given to provide context, as well as the aesthetic and design history of the most popular van, the Volkswagen Microbus.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my advisors, Coleman Coker and Dr. Janet M. Davis, for encouraging me to take on this uniquely challenging and interesting thesis. It has been a pleasure to have validation in the pursuit of my goals and the opportunity to share my passion, research, and experience in an academic setting.

Thank you to all of Plan II Honors; and by that I mean the department, the major, the office with cookies, and the scholarships for supporting me throughout my college experience. I truly could not have succeeded in either of my academic pursuits without the unique support and balance provided by the Liberal Arts experience, and I appreciate the unique perspective it has given me. I feel so special around such incredible people and truly value an interdisciplinary honors degree and all that Plan II has afforded me.

I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering support in my personal and academic goals, especially at their intersection in this thesis. I genuinely could not have done any of this without you, and I am so thankful for the position I am in coming out of college and the support I have received along the way. Your enthusiasm, patience, listening skills, and extensive knowledge of woodworking and 12-volt electrical systems have truly brought this project to life. Thank you.

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Introduction

This paper consists of two major parts: a history of American van life on a sociological and physical basis, and an overview of the built project and reflections on experience and design goals. Origins of van life in America are traced via sociological roots by generation, from post-WWII to the 21st century. Social and economic factors play into the American interpretation of van life and the role it plays, all leading up to where it is today. These roots are apparent in the physical design of the vehicle and can be traced in this respect as well, as modern interpretations of the van take on both new and classic values.

The buildout section outlines project design goals and the concrete actions taken to achieve them, as well as a reflection on where and how these project goals are achieved, whether that be in the physical or experiential interpretations of van life, or both. The paper concludes with closing thoughts on the personal goals and expectations achieved by the project, and how they tie into current matters. All in all, this paper intends to give the reader a significant overview of the history of van life and the author's lived interpretation of it.

Sociological Roots of the Van Life Movement

Van life exists in the context of the generations who partake in it. From the post-WWII generation of Baby Boomers to Millennials and Gen Z, each has taken a unique affinity and contributed their influence on American life on the road. Coupled with historical, cultural events that shape each generation is a new interpretation of van life, all of which lead us to where it lies today.

One influence that ties this all together is the newly-defined era in which we now exist, coined “metamodernism” by Vermioulen and Akker in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*.¹ Defined in 2010, one of its six pillars is that: “the present is a symptom of the twin birth of

immediacy and obsolescence. Today, we are nostalgists as much as we are futurists.”² I believe this applies to the resurgence of van life from the 1970s to today, as well as balance in physical appreciations of vans themselves being both restored from original 1970s vans or newly refurbished Sprinters, both equally valid expressions of the same phenomena. This mixture of nostalgia and forward-thinking is influential now and I am sure has influenced me, and we can trace its circular roots through the generations.

Starting from the youngest generations, external trends such as shifting workplace culture and social media are likely to largely impact van life participation. As few members of Gen Z, being born between 1990 and 2000 for the purposes of this paper, are old enough or are in positions in life to be making investments in things like van life, economic forces such as work-from-home are apt to have a huge impact on the movement. Nearly all the case studies I have researched on van lifers have full or part-time jobs that they take on the road, and that is all possible due to the possibility to work remotely. Working regularly from home has increased 173% since 2005, and the trend continues to climb. Given the chance, 80% of employees prefer to work from home at least some of the time.³ Especially with the onset of COVID-19 and the tectonic changes in workforce habits happening now, it will be interesting to see how those changes may impact the popularity of van life. As of June 2020, 42% of the U.S. workforce worked from home and previous roadblocks such as stigma around being out of the office have all but disappeared.⁴ Time spent working from home post-COVID-19 is expected to increase fourfold, from 5% to 20%.⁵ It’s important to note that not all jobs can be successfully done outside of an office environment, but nonetheless, unlike previous generations, Gen Z are presented with the opportunity to take their work where they want to go, and not the other way around.

Social media also plays a massive role in spreading both information and inspiration for this generation, as many van life bloggers have an impactful online presence. Shown to such a

young and impressionable audience, van life bloggers share a duality of aesthetic images as well as practical, technical information that make van life seem both desirable and attainable. The direct contact of social media viewers with creators creates a sense of intimacy, and an attitude of “if she can do it, I can do it too,” a direct quote of van-lifer Kaya Lindsey, and from my own personal experience.⁶ The accessibility and interactivity of social media makes the possibility of van life seem realistic. This generation’s interest as van life is commonly seen on goal boards of Gen Z on sites like Pinterest.

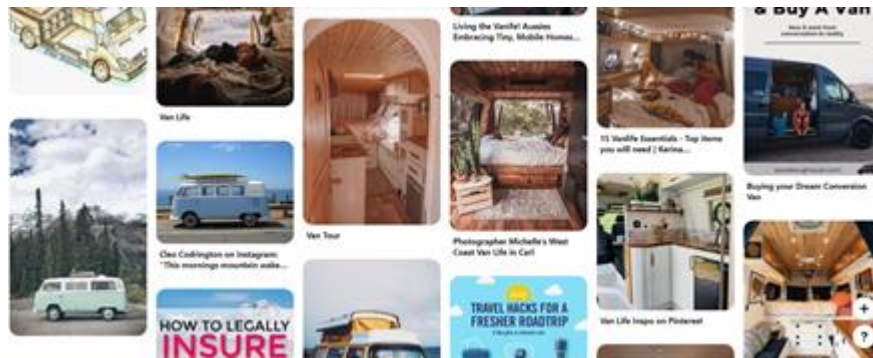


Figure 1. Screenshot of Pinterest Results with Search Query “Van Life”

Being digitally connected also plays a vital role within the community, as practical information such as park maps and campsite reservations is easily accessible online. This empowers people to do things remotely. The community itself, either expressed through social media or on more formal online mediums like blogs, is a supportive place with helpful information and tips, as well as a community. Lisa Miriam Jacobs, a van-lifer native to Austin, says “It can be lonely on the road sometimes, but I can tap into Instagram and YouTube for a vibrant van life community.”⁷ Take the collaboration between Eamon & Bec and Trent & Allie, both van life bloggers, meeting up for dinner and discussing the differences in their van conversions, having an honest conversation about their preferences, practicality, and price in a video on their YouTube channel.⁸ Disseminating practical information without a culture of gatekeeping both strengthens and generates a strong community on the road, and distributing it

via social media and the internet to be accessed by young, impressionable, and engaged minds makes van life accessible and romanticized to Gen Z.

Due to the economic conditions of influential times of their lives, millennials born between 1980 and 1990 have a unique relationship to van life. Despite dealing with larger amounts of student debt than the generations before them, millennials prefer workplace flexibility over student loan forgiveness or tuition reimbursement as an employee benefit.⁹ Micro living is popular among this demographic, as they graduated college amidst the 2008 financial crisis and continue to struggle with its personal financial ramifications.

Micro living is an umbrella term for small, all-encompassing living spaces and can manifest in several ways, including van life and tiny houses. Some tiny houses even come on wheels, further blurring the lines between micro living and van life specifically.



Figure 2. A Tiny House on Wheels.

The title of the article where the above figure is found describes the dilemma of millennials perfectly: *This tiny house on wheels is nicer than most studio apartments.*¹⁰ In a generation struggling to gain financial footing, building wealth is a high priority, and the traditional way to do so in the American middle class is to buy a house. However, with limited savings for a down payment or an affinity against risk from unstable job markets and from

seeing other adults lose their houses to the 2008 financial crisis, millennials may find a goldilocks-type fit with micro living. Limited space also quells the temptation for excessive materialism, further reducing consumerism and cutting down on unnecessary expenses.

With fewer square feet comes less to pay for. Unlike their parents, millennials deal with a large amount of student debt. For millennials, micro living provides the opportunity to own a home in a real estate market where many are either priced out or cannot get approved for a mortgage due to their debt load. According to the Project on Student Debt, roughly two-thirds of college students in 2008 graduated with student loan debt. Just 12 years earlier, in 1996, the average debt load was \$13,200 and only 58% of graduates used loans to finance their education.¹¹ In 2020, the average student's loan debt is a whopping \$32, 731, with a 10% delinquency rate.¹² Graduating into a recession affects lifelong earning potential for this generation, further limiting millennials from reaching the abundant physical wealth of their parents. Older millennials are buying fewer houses than those born ten years earlier.¹³ In the markets themselves, the upward trend of buying larger homes reached a plateau as homebuyers began to favor "right-sizing," choosing their living space on the basis of lifestyle fit rather than price-per-square-foot optimization.¹⁴

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, once markets had stabilized and careers gained footing, millennials were finally ready to take on investments. Five years after the financial crisis, terms associated with micro living trended upwards and became a popular phenomenon. There is a clear uptick in search terms like "tiny home" and "van life" around 2013-2014, citing data from Google Trends.¹⁵ Van life, as a largely digital community, can be easily tracked using popular internet metrics.

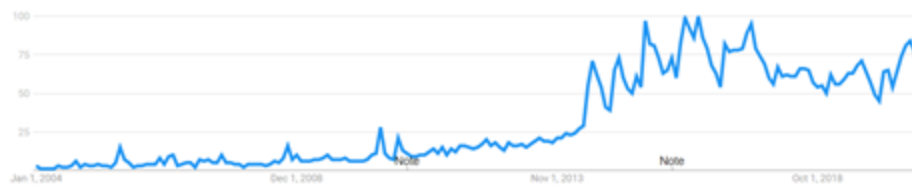


Figure 3. Uptick in search term popularity for query “tiny house”

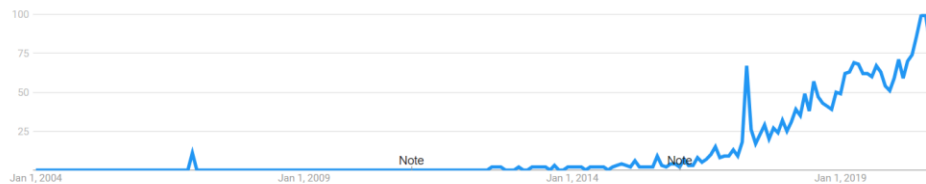


Figure 4. Uptick in search term popularity for query “vanlife”

Kaya Lindsey, millennial and full-time van lifer and vlogger, describes her generation’s experience in a video on her YouTube channel titled *Why Vanlife?*. “I don’t want to pay rent. I want to live a minimalistic lifestyle. I have everything I need, not things that I just want. I have freedom and flexibility and it comes with risk, but those times pass and it’s worth it.”¹⁶ Living in Santa Cruz most of the year, Lindsey describes her van life friends, people with high-paying Silicon Valley jobs doing the same thing, a nod to the financial and generational ties to this trend.

Before reaching mainstream popularity with the millennial generation, van life went dormant under the reign of Gen X.¹⁷ Growing up in the wake of Nixon’s financial policies and coming to maturity during the economic and consumerist opulence of the Regan era, Gen X, born between 1965 and 1980, lack some of the financial motivation of the Millennial generation; However, the cultural phenomena of the road trip is practiced and beloved by Gen X. Films like *Easy Rider* (1969) and *National Lampoon’s Vacation* (1983) both document and glorify the

prevalence of road trips among this generation as beneficiaries of the car-centric culture and interstate highway system they inherited from Baby Boomers.

Setting the foundation of Gen X's financial future was Nixon's shock of 1971, a policy which removed the value of the dollar from the gold standard and instead made it dependent on the performance of the American economy, forcing its value to float. Now that money was not backed by any physical value, along with an internationally accepted system of fiat money and floating currencies, the era of credit could rise. Coming to financial maturity during the abundance of the Regan era, Gen X was uniquely equipped to achieve the American dream. With credit came accessibility to wealth, as generous government loans empowered Gen X to go to school or buy a house or car, investments that increased their ability to support a better financial future, or at least live like that was so. Stepping away from the hippie counterculture they observed growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, Gen X experienced, as exquisitely phrased by Alberto Gallo in an article for the World Economic Forum, "greed, the unshackled pursuit of individual wealth, turned from vice to virtue."¹⁸

Comparing economic realities for millennials and Gen X shows how sensitive these trends are to economic conditions. Millennials, not knowing any better, kept the loan-taking mindset of their older peers and had faith that the US economy would be there to support them, the way it had for Gen X. However, the dot com bust levelled off the US's exponential economic growth and to toss salt in the wounds, the 2008 financial crisis turned it down. Without a robust economy to grow into, an entire generation of millennials got trapped under massive loads of student debt. Associating the superfluous material wealth of Gen X with their trappedness, they made greed the enemy, and a rise in value of experience over material items, minimalism, and micro living was the reaction. Millennials, in rebellion to the advice given by Gen X, adopted an appreciation the Gen X counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

The origins of American van life begin with the Baby Boomers. Born after World War II between the years of 1946 and 1964, Baby Boomers experienced the popularization of the Beat movement in the 1950s, which laid the cultural foundation for nomadism in the United States. Values of this movement include quest-making, exploration for its own sake, and the rejection of economic materialism, all of which align van life values today.¹⁹ Authors synonymous with the movement like Jack Kerouac, the well-known writer and poet, romanticize the alternative lifestyle of life on the road. Kerouac's *On The Road*, described as "one of the great American novels," features a main character who seasonally crosses the country several times with little money, meeting friends and falling in love along the way, in addition to many other interesting adventures.²⁰ An excellent read, *On The Road* is a keen look into the thoughts and lifestyle romanticized by the Beat movement.

Physically, the movement of people around the second World War and federal investment in suburbanization and an interstate highway system laid the literal foundations for American life on the road. Mass movement of Americans began with the onset of WWII, as people moved from rural to urban centers to take on industrial jobs and fill in for those who left to spend their energies on the war effort. Upon their return, the construction of suburbs encouraged by federal legislation increased and solidified American dependence on the car. The passing of the Federal Highway Act of 1956 under Eisenhower called for the construction of over 41,000 miles of interstate highways, a national network which continues to serve generations to this day.²¹

Baby boomers today continue to embrace life on the road and have even adopted other aspects of micro living. As the largest aging generation in the US, retiring Baby Boomers are gaining freedom of mobility and those who enjoy travel have the opportunity to crisscross the country, some of which stay full-time in RV's, like Betty & John of RV Seniors and their dog, Blaze.²² Drivers for life on the road include economic purposes, such as reducing living expenses

like a mortgage, as well as recreation and the ability to easily visit family. Other micro living concepts embraced by the Baby Boomers include downsizing in general and buying tiny homes as mother-in-law suites on their children's property.²³ Regardless of the format, we have the Beat movement and the Baby Boomers who embraced it to thank for the origins of American van life.

Notes on Accessibility and the Intersectionality of Van Life

I would be amiss if I did not recognize the history of van life and American life on the road as a primarily white, upper-middle class, male history. Significant social barriers make van life inaccessible to certain intersections of identity, most significantly of those of race and gender. Ramifications of social phenomena such as racism in sundown towns and women's personal safety in the context of sexual assault all serve as extra barriers to accessibility, although trends in the community show signs that the tide is shifting.

In my position as a white upper middle-class woman, van life has only recently become accessible to me and is still met with some hesitation. When I tell others about my trips, I am frequently met with concern over the basis of my gender identity and the gender identity of those I choose to travel with. Not until recently was "solo female van life" something considered possible or practiced by other women, and often women in the community have to explain their justification as to why their chosen lifestyle is safe and how they practice extensive safety measures with features not present in the experience of men.

Among the landscape of American life on the road is a charged racial history that continues to have ramifications to this day. Sundown towns openly refuse to accommodate BIPOC and guides such as *The Negro Motorist Green Book* by Victor Hugo Green were necessary for navigating domestic travel during the Jim Crow era. BIPOC continue to be underrepresented in van life but are trending toward more participation, as popular Black van

life influencers like Jenelle Eliana inspire and empower others. To be safe and supported on the road, BIPOC must take into consideration things that white-passing people do not have to consider and as a valid concern, that may pose as a significant, if not definite, roadblock to van life.

I recognize my privilege to be able to complete this project while striving to ensure that van life becomes and is sustained as a space of safety, security, and welcomeness for all intersections of identity.

Physical Roots of the Van Life Movement

At its roots, van life begins physically with the inception of the VW microbus. Iconic and popular among the counterculture of the 1960s, the VW microbus laid the foundations as a physical symbol of American nomadism, as well as a space for it to grow. A testament to its timelessness and reemerging popularity, the VW microbus is going to be redesigned and re-released as the I.D. Buzz in 2022.²⁴ This time it is electric, aligning with the values of sustainability for new American nomads.



Figure 5. The VW microbus and its modern counterpart.

The VW microbus, perhaps as its inception, was designed to be embraced by counterculture. From its emergence in the 1950s, the VW microbus' rear-mounted engine and bubbly body design contrasted starkly with the sleek, low-riding sedans with opulent grills that

were popular at the time.²⁵ "When you encountered a microbus with a full painted face, two-tone trim and a big VW badge—that was something completely different coming at you on the street" notes Stewart Reed, chair of the Transportation Design Department at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA.²⁶ Among the hippies of the 1960s, the VW microbus was considered ideal for its simplicity of maintenance, spacious interior, and bright colors. By its original owners and new generations alike, the VW microbus is universally embraced by those who appreciate "simplicity, efficiency, and adventure."²⁷

The Buildout

Similar to the VW microbus, the physical interpretation of this project was designed around a set of defined values and goals. Professor Coleman Coker of the Department of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin defines five tenets of humanitarian design, which align well with the original goals of van life and are aimed to be achieved here.²⁸ They are as follows:

1. Moderation as a first principle.
2. Embracing a "small is beautiful" approach.
3. Being open to change and designing for it.
4. Designing with the whole in mind and not just its parts.
5. Humility towards others (and this includes all things).

The buildout of the van aims to consider each of these tenets in some capacity. Choices in design, material, and usage call back to these goals.



Figure 6. Interior with bed retracted.

Figure 6 shows the main cabin interior with the bed retracted. This is the state in which the van is kept most of the time when not sleeping and can fit someone of a height of six feet or less comfortably on either side, like a sofa. The indoor kitchen is on the right, the outdoor kitchen, table, and monitor on the left, with cushions along both sides and into the back. The ceiling is outfitted with a vent fan and thermostat, LED puck lights, LED strip lights along the sides, and a decorative headliner. Durable rugs with traction matting line the inner hallway and entryway, as seen in Figure 13. The van has five cabin windows that pop out and are fitted with custom Velcro bug screens that provide extra ventilation. The van is also outfitted with insulation and removable insulated window covers, which can ensure privacy and regulate the internal temperature of the van, whether hot or cold.



Figure 7. Interior with bed extended.

When pulled together, the cushions on the right and left side create a sleeping area the size equivalent of a queen-sized bed with storage for four standard boxes cubes underneath. All the cushions have designated locations for each configuration, fitting together like a puzzle to fill the entire platform. The bed fits three adults, or two adults comfortably. The cushions are custom-cut from a memory foam mattress and don hand-sewn cushion covers, with material chosen for its durability and ability to hide dirt. The cushion height was optimized to be the most comfortable while both sitting and sleeping. The interior height is not tall enough to stand in but is relatively comfortable for one to bend over or kneel.



Figure 8. Monitor and desk extended.

Figure 8 shows the pull-out table with an adjustable monitor. It can be used as a desk or dining table. As seen in Figures 6 and 7, both the monitor and table fold along the side of the cabin during transport. The monitor is mounted on an adjustable swivel mount near the door hinge and can either face the bed or the outside of the van when the inside door is opened, adaptable for watching TV in bed, or from the outside while cooking or tailgating. The passenger seat pictured in Figure 9 is also mounted on a swivel, meaning it can face both the dashboard or the cabin of the van, creating a more open space when the van is parked, providing extra seating.



Figure 9. Passenger seat with swivel mount, facing the cabin of the van.



Figure 10. Outdoor kitchen on the reverse hinge side door.

The kitchen of the van comes in two parts: the outdoor kitchen, located on the left side of the van on the rear-hinged door and shown in Figure 10, and the indoor kitchen, located opposite the cabin entrance and pictured in Figure 13. An outdoor kitchen is necessary for cooking with open flames on camp stoves as gas-powered stoves require extensive ventilation. The stove pictured here is a standard butane camping stove with camping dishes and a small-item storage shelf above it. The unit itself opens on a hinge facing away from the van to create another outside dining table and reveals in-door storage for bulk food items. More food storage

is on the main cabin door opposite the outdoor kitchen and is visible in Figure 13. The outdoor kitchen unit folds in for transport, as demonstrated in Figure 8.

The indoor kitchen contains a sink basin with a faucet, drain, pump, filter, freshwater tank, microwave, and fridge-freezer. The water tank is removable for filling and its five-gallon capacity has been proven to be more than enough for a full weekend in the desert. The filter is installed to guarantee that water is potable, as this water is used for drinking and cooking and may be collected from various sources along the road. The sink drains directly underneath the driver's side door. The microwave, fridge-freezer, and pump are all powered by the 12-volt battery system installed under the sofa bed and charged via solar panel or external alternator. The system is independent of the engine's battery, therefore protecting the engine's battery from being drained on behalf of the electrical components in the cabin.



Figure 11. Bench seat and storage at the back of the van.

Figure 11 is the view of the van's interior from the back with the rear doors open, showing the rubber mats, storage space, and back bench. The rubber matted area is for bulk storage and wet, muddy, or dusty items like hiking boots or lifejackets. Hooks on the right and left side of the bench are for hanging swimsuits, towels, or other damp items. The bottom compartments on both the left and right side house electrical components and the removable window insulation, as well as a jumper cable and tire jack. For access to external power, an extension cord comes from the back-left compartment and can be plugged into a standard outlet, fitting under the door seal when closed.

The top left compartment houses the cabin A/C, and the top right compartment is a closet with a hanging rod, as shown in Figure 12. The bench seat is reinforced and outfitted with a hinge for large-item storage for the transport of paddleboards and kayaks. A flexible booklight and standard outlets on the right side allow for subtle illumination of the back at night.



Figure 12. Hinged bench seat for large-item storage and the closet.

Also handy for illumination are LED light bars outfitted on each side of the van, which are incredibly helpful for setting up campsites in the dark. Standard outlets, USB sockets, and booklights are strategically placed throughout the van and are powered by the 12-volt electrical system, which is housed under the right-side sofa.

The electrical system includes room for two portable golf-cart batteries, myriad wires installed in the ceiling and wooden structure to power lights and outlets, a transformer for the standard outlets, and solar panels and an external alternator to charge the batteries. On a standard charge, the input from three hours of direct sunlight on the solar panels is enough to run the microwave for five minutes. These calculations are done manually using data from the electrical display of energy input and output located beneath the cushions near the indoor kitchen. The electrical system is cooled with a fan and its temperature monitored with a thermometer that reads to a display. A mini fuse box is installed on the right side of the van underneath the sofa for easy access.



Figure 13. Kitchen with view of the cabin entryway and in-door storage.

Figure 13 is the main entryway to the cabin, with insulated in-door storage, the indoor kitchen directly ahead, and the reverse hinge side door to the left. The black mats prevent dirt from entering the cabin area. A privacy curtain to the right of the cabin door separates the driver and passenger seats from the cabin and can be outfitted with a removable blackout curtain. The outdoor kitchen unit can be seen on the door to the left, which opens out to be flush with the exterior of the van.



Figure 14. Van exterior.

In terms of overall details, the van is a 2010 Chevy Express with an extended 18' cabin. It stands eight feet tall with the mounted solar panels on top. It has an internal combustion engine

with 13 MPG highway, running on regular gas with an E85 capacity. Materials used in the van were either purchased new or repurposed from the previous owner, including items such as the sink, fan, and some of the internal woodworking. It was purchased via Craigslist as an unfinished van project and before that, it was owned by the State of California and used to transfer prisoners to and from court. Recycling an older vehicle is cost-effective as well as environmentally conscious, as buying a new vehicle arguably uses more resources than an older one that runs with less fuel efficiency. As both a source of transportation and a living space, van life allows for the significant reduction of an individual's carbon footprint.

Achieving Design Goals

This project is unique in that its design goals can be met by both physical form and experience, as the van itself and the lifestyle it promotes both work to achieve these goals. The first two tenets of humanitarian design, the value of moderation and the “small is beautiful” approach, are inherently achieved through van life. In a small, mobile space, only the necessities are taken and whatever is gained along the way is filtered through and kept only if it meets the highest standards of value, whether that be sentimental or practical. Any unspoken-for space is either more room to move or more room to grow, both of which are fertile grounds for fulfillment.

Not only being open to change, but designing for it, is a commonly practiced principle in van life. In the physical design of this project, adaptability exists in the various power sources and outlets for the electrical system. As a couple of consecutive cloudy days have the potential to render the solar panels useless, the alternator exists to charge the batteries regardless of the weather. A common practice in full-time van life is to change location based on the season, meaning adaptability, mobility, and flexibility in the design of both plans and space are key. In the van life community, many people share their experience building their van and give insightful feedback as to what is important, what is not important, and what they value the most on both a personalized and universal basis. Van life in terms of the community, individual, and physical are all open to, welcoming, and even embracing of change.

Designing with the whole in mind is necessary in a limited space as each component needs one, if not multiple, purposes. For example, the van's cushions all fit together in either the sofa or platform bed configuration with no extraneous pieces. If any cushions did not have a purpose, their presence would likely be a burden and take up space that hinders movement or the possibility of carrying something else of value. With the thoughtful design of all possibilities of conformations of the space, however, this issue is avoided. Other examples include the fridge-freezer which can change temperature depending on the amount and type of groceries and the swivel mount of the passenger seat, effectively doubling seating capacity in the cabin, among others.

The tenet of humility towards others and all things is met physically in the chosen model of the van, as well as the economic frugality and mindfulness of carbon footprint that come in tandem with the van life lifestyle. I could have chosen a flashy, retrofitted Mercedes Sprinter van, but my 2010 Chevy Express fits comfortably widthwise into a standard parking space and is inconspicuous enough to be parked on and lived in on a residential street. Unlike other common van models, the one chosen for this project has nearly 360 degrees worth of windows, which allow you to wake up in the morning in awe of your surroundings, and if covered in insulation, in gratitude for warmth and security. The less-is-more attitude of micro living and the reduced environmental impact that comes along with it are tenets of humility woven into most aspects of van life.

Through experience, humility means being a supportive and responsible member of the community, whether that's by sharing honest experiences, leaving no trace, or giving back to those who have helped you, all of which are values held by the van life community. Kaylee and Jordan of The Nomadic Movement on YouTube have the goal to feed 1,000 people in every city they travel to, giving back to the communities they stay in and doing it all with a tiny van kitchen.²⁹ To have a considerable cultural impact while leaving a smaller carbon footprint and

caring for the spaces that make it all worthwhile is of service to both nature and people, which are inherently intertwined.

Reflections on Experience and Personal Goals

If you can believe it, my van life experience has been even better than what the blogs and photos online portray it to be. Yes, sometimes you are spending the night in an RV park next to a freshly fertilized field, and no, not every night is spent under Joshua Tree National Park -level stars, but the van life experience for me has brought all of the splendid goals of freedom, affordability, flexibility, adventure, and more. At its essence, van life is a good excuse to have a lot of fun, and those memories are worth more than all the other benefits combined.

The memories I have made along the road with friends will far outlive the technical specifications or societal impact of van life in my mind. This project has given me plenty of excuses to have fun, most of which I did not know I needed until I got them. Without it, I wouldn't have gone from Austin to California and back in January of 2020, checking off bucket list national parks in the southwest a la the Grand Canyon, visiting with my friend and road trip buddy Sophie's amazing and extensive family, experiencing my first Shabbat dinner, learning what K-Pop was, seeing childhood friends in San Diego, discovering my new favorite city of Santa Barbara, tasting Philz coffee, getting spooked in Roswell, New Mexico and feeling delirious in the middle of nowhere, Texas. Little did I know this spur of the moment, "hey I finished my project early, let's go somewhere" trip would have to suffice for my lived van life experience. It was my last major trip this year before the onset of a worldwide pandemic.

Van life was the excuse for driving up to Colorado on my birthday of March 14, where my friend and I stayed from spring break to the end of the semester, a total of two months, after we got a text in Amarillo saying the ski slopes had been closed for the rest of the season. That's where we met the neighbors who introduced us to Colorado life, I got to see the changes of the

season in the mountains, make music in a retrofitted ranger cabin, and spend the weekend at Lake Powell, where we almost lost the van after not being able to pull it out of the sand. These moments do not come with the renovation plans or inspirational backgrounds but are the highlight of my experience, and those moments and feelings are hard to capture. But every single one of them has been worth it and a thousand times more.

Concluding Thoughts

Van life is an excuse to get up and go, to get outside and meet like-minded people, the courage to drive in the direction of a whim, stop on a dime, and call a strange place home. Regardless of whether a van is your vehicle, I wish this whimsy and trust in the magnificence of the world upon every person and traveler, and I encourage those to keep in mind how precious these moments are. Especially in times like these, with flights and travel halted, civil unrest, the economy at a standstill and a long path towards hope, it's those moments where you recall what's worth fighting for, waiting for, bringing along, and serve as a reminder as to what awaits you on the other side. Van life is a good excuse to have a lot of fun, as most anything should be, and for that it has been more valuable and met more goals than I could have ever imagined.



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Photo Appendix

More photos, trip details, and personal information listed here: <https://van--ii.tumblr.com/>

Biography

Erin Grace Smith was born in Dallas, Texas on March 14, 1998 and grew up in the SpringPark neighborhood of Garland, Texas. She graduated from the Ursuline Academy of Dallas in 2016 and subsequently attended The University of Texas at Austin, studying Chemical Engineering and Plan II Honors. In college, she was an active member of Texas Spirits and the Society of Women Engineers. She graduates in December 2020 with plans to work for Capital One as a software engineer in August 2021, intending to travel in her van prior to the start date.